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Poetry and Politics

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Panel: Writing and Its Mis/Fortunes: How I Write Where I Write

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Poetry and Politics

Political poetry, perhaps, was born when it stood against politics and said: "I don't accept you!" In other words, political poetry originates from its encounter with politics. In fact, when poetry withdraws from politics, it politicizes itself, because abandoning politics is a politics of another kind. Even the discussion on the relation of poetry with politics is a political stance.

Initially the encounter of poetry with politics starts when society, which is the source and breeding ground of poetry, is monitored and administrated by politics. Politics wants society to be explained within its own terms; however, poetry has a language of its own. Politics is bossy, thus in the very first meeting it offers red, green and black spectacles to poetry and commands it to look at the world behind those glasses and praise it. Nonetheless, poetry rejects this gift and answers, "I can see the world brighter without the glasses."

This antagonism is long lasting. And today's international political poetry is but the memoir of this opposition. This tale will be continued for ages, and at times, politics replaces the eyeglasses with marks of burning iron bars. It is in this story that a thousand year ago; the burning iron bars were put on eyes of Rodaki Samarqandi, one of Persian Dari's fathers, and blinded that great lord of poetry. Perhaps Rodaki, my grand forefather, had not accepted a master's gift.

By resisting politics, poetry not only politicizes itself but also proclaims an opposition to the status quo, similar to intellectuals who have always opposed the status quo. With this view, the great poets are also great intellectuals because they are not only in opposition to the status quo and politics, but are in favor of its change as well.

When Hafiz says 700 year ago:

بیا تا گل بر افشانیم و می در ساغر اندازیم
فلک را سقف بشگافیم و طرح نو در اندازیم

*Let us diffuse flower and pour wine in goblets
And pierce the roof of sky and establish a new constellation*

He not only announces his opposition with the traditions of that age, but also wishes for them to change.

Or when Naser Khosrow Balkhi, a great philosopher and poet of Persian Dari, says in the 11th century:

من آنم که در پای خوکان نریزم
مرا این قیمتی در لفظ دری را

I am not the one who spoils the invaluable pearls of Dari under the feet of "swine"

He truly stands for the reverence and purity of words, and conveys the message to the poets in the palace not to contaminate the spotlessness of poetry.

These were examples of saying “No” to politics and the dominant political structure.

However, it does not always occur like this. Sometimes poetry retreats to the ivory tower of isolation after withdrawing from politics. The poets domiciled in the ivory tower shut themselves away from themselves and get swamped in making love to imaginary beloveds. The importance and value of this kind of poetry is related merely to its literary and aesthetic aspects. Its social or political point of view may be considered neutral.

Political poetry is not just a literary phenomenon of our era but it has always existed and till the end of the world the encounter of poetry with politics will continue; however, only the methods of this opposition change.

Moreover, it is of great significance to consider political poetry and politicized poetry as two different concepts. Political poetry, as said earlier, emerges from the antagonism of dominant politics and political structure; whereas, politicized poetry is the surrendered form of poetry to political circumstances. Intellectual poets have always written political poetry but they have never written poetry for politics because they understand that doing so means mortifying themselves and the poetry. Besides, as politics open a new chapter, the politicized poetry serving that cause dies, too. Had the world poets navigated their sails in the direction of political winds, doubtlessly, we would have neither Shahnamaye Ferdowsi in the Persian poetry, nor would we have *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and *The Divine Comedy* in Western poetry.

In Persian Dari, political poetry is deeply rooted. In fact, poetry started in this language with politics. Hanzala Badghisi, who is considered one of the first poets of Persian Dari, lived in early 9th century. This piece attributed to him is thought to be the first poem in Persian Dari.

مهتری گر به کام شیر در است
شو خطرکن ز کام شیر بجوی
یا بزرگی و عزو نعمت و جاه
یا چومردانت مرگ رویا روی

*Even if eminence is in the lion's mouth
Risk to achieve it
Either dignity, respect and esteem
Or a man's death*

Hanzala wrote this piece when his country was in great distress under the Arab atrocity. In this piece he compares freedom to death and encourages people to seek freedom and pride, and to fight against foreign invasion. The theme of this poetry is resistance and thus it can be said that both political poetry and poetry of resistance in Persian Dari starts from the 9th century.

However, the discourse of modern political poetry in Afghanistan dates back to the early 20th century. The publication of *Saraj-ul-Akhhbar Daily*, in 1911, may be considered the advent of the modern era in political poetry of Afghanistan. Political poetry was interwoven with “Mashroteyat”

or “Constitutional” movements in those times. This movement was commenced by Afghan intellectuals, writers, poets and social activists with an aim to ensure complete political freedom and a constitutional system in Afghanistan.

Following that, in the democracy decade (1963 – 1973), political poetry got mixed with right and leftwing ideologies. Another outcome of this decade was the creation of communists and Islamic political organizations and political parties. All these organizations used poetry as a means of propagating their ideological thoughts.

Leftwing Communist movements considered poetry an effective weapon to be employed. In that period the concepts of proletarian revolution, praising the proletariat, the peasant, socialism and Lenin was recorded for the first time in modern Afghan literature. The literary social structures introduced in the beginning of the century were developed primarily by the poets affiliated with the communist movement. One of the characteristics of that period’s poetry was its ideological and rebellious nature which invited people to revolt against the government.

The communist coup d'état in 1978 linked poetry to political and ideological structures more than any time in Afghanistan’s history. In those years, there was a line which existed everywhere. It was a red line which divided people into the revolutionary and reactionary factions. This line divided the poets into two parts of revolutionary and reactionary poets as well. The party poets, who wrote poetry against the government in the democracy decade, had turned into the admirers of government and would despise the independent poets.

The independent poets mainly faced three fates. Some of them were executed in Pul-e Charkhi prison. Some others spent their lives behind bars, and the remaining fled into Iran and Pakistan and established the overseas resistance literature.

Afghan literature, on one hand, greatly underwent politicized, ideological and governmental experiences in those years. On the other hand, resistance poetry became more prominent than ever. Particularly in 1980’s internal resistance poetry flourished greatly.

The poets affiliated with Jihadi groups had an instrumental approach with poetry as well. After the triumph of Mujahidin over the communists, the Jihadi poets turned into governmental poets and considered the other poets remaining in Kabul communists. The Mujahidin reign was a period of severe bloodshed in Kabul; however, these incidents had not been reflected in writings of Jihadi poets at all. In that period, Mujahidin burned thousands of books published during the communists’ regime as wood in heaters. I myself was a witness to the burning of thousands of books of the “Afghanistan Writers Association.” Caravans of refugees from Afghanistan increased and more poets deserted the country.

The Taliban, entering Kabul with rhythmic slogans, opposed romantic poetry because they thought it would promote ethical vice among young people. Locking the doors of cultural and artistic centers, they made the poets understand that Afghanistan was no longer a suitable place for them. As a result, many well-known poets left the country, many of whom migrated to Peshawar, Pakistan. This led to another expansion of Afghan cultural activities in Peshawar.

Women's poetry could hardly breathe during Mujahidin rule in Afghanistan and was completely muted during the Taliban's. Compelling everyone to observe silence, the whips left no well-known women poets remaining in the country.

Afghanistan has entered a new phase of socio-political life since the collapse of the Taliban in November 2001.

Seemingly, there is some proof of a nurturing and promotion of poetry in the country. The country has joined the PEN International as a dynamic member, and has currently a functioning Afghan PEN in its capital city, Kabul.

Still, needless to say, both literature in general, and poetry in particular, have been seriously marginalized by other practical means of life. This in turn has resulted in placing Afghan intellectuals (both writers and poets) in an awkward situation. They have mainly been feeling isolated, cornered and suffering from significant lack of consideration by their culture. Doubtlessly, Afghan writers and poets presume their existence in a low social stratum.

The current wave of poetry in Afghanistan maintains its presence in a number of those highly committed poets and writers who see their destiny tightly interrelated with their literary products.

The once-powerful voice of the Afghan poem has been mainly under-echoed and therefore has remained less-heard. The chaos of widespread noises of explosion, violence and firing are becoming a kind of daily routine overshadowing literature in general.

The prospect hardly seems to be a joy. The vision and the "prime objective" that used to be the greatest motif for composing quality poetry are no longer as tangible as they once were. With a culture, widely more responsive to visual media, Afghanistan is in the grips of a "free market" now, and the market's so-called values.

The unavoidable influence of commonly used English terminology in Farsi and Pashto is another notable challenge for these two local Afghan languages. It is quite evident that the course of time will sooner or later display a mosaic of "ready made" languages, perhaps called Anglo-Persian (Pers-English) and Anglo-Pashtu (Pasht-English).

Presently, English is the dominant and prevailing medium of communication in over 2000 national and international Afghanistan-based Non-Governmental Organizations offices, and a wide range of governmental institutions. Moreover, a large youth population has a burning desire to learn English and various computer programs (which of course are in English). This not only hinders the enthusiasm for learning their mother tongue, but also affects the indigenous process of learning science and culture in their initial language.

In the absence of a clear and specific cultural policy, the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture has been unable to publish even five books in the span of five years.

Still, it is striking to note that a peculiar type of "resistance poetry" is once again on the verge of emerging from the existing wave of poetry, most of which appears as satire.

To conclude, a thorough and meticulous research of poetry in general, and political poetry in particular in the post-Taliban years is yet to be undertaken.

Political poems have gradually gained more strength. Presumably, poetry and politics have been and still are proceeding along as two co-travelers, marching as two parallel vectors.

Can the notions still exist that poetry does not have any feature but to praise beauty and bring joy, and that we shall not load the heavy burden of social and political issues on its soft shoulders? I do not know, but I feel this notion can only exist in a utopia, where love rules, where triggers are unknown to hands, where ears are unfamiliar to explosions and where freedom is another name for life. But in a country where one's *Musalmāni* (*Belief in Islam*) is measured from the length of his beard, and its city's rivers smell of blood, and where blood grows instead of red flowers in the garden and where *bread* is the hot topic, poetry can never be a silent spectator sitting in its beautiful ivory tower. Yes, if poetry is not political in such lands, it should be made political.